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## **Corbynism, Blue Labour and post-liberal national populism: A Marxist critique**

**Matt Bolton** Department of Humanities, University of Roehampton

**Frederick Harry Pitts** Department of Management, University of Bristol

### **Abstract**

Responding to recent debates, this article challenges the presentation of Corbynism and Blue Labour as competing philosophical tendencies in the contemporary British Labour Party. It does so with reference to their shared mobilisation around post-liberal and national-populist notions of the relationship between nations, states, society, citizens and the outside world, and critiques of capitalism and liberal democracy that they hold in common. Uncovering a largely subterranean 'critical Marxist' counterpoint that seeks to 'hold the centre' rather than rhetorically or theoretically endorse its destabilisation, the article outlines the other paths available from within the intellectual traditions of the Labour Party and wider left, concluding that there is a real philosophical alternative to both Corbynism and Blue Labour.

### **Introduction**

What is Corbynism? The Corbyn movement comprises a variety of different strands of the British left, each of which have fed into Corbynism something of their own theoretical and rhetorical constitution. Firstly, and most prominently in terms of organisation and leadership, there is the 'trad Left' strand represented by Corbyn himself, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, strategist Seamus Milne, head of the Unite union Len McCluskey and advisor Andrew Murray. Typically, but with inevitable exceptions, this wing mixes eighties-issue 'Bennite' economic nationalism with Leninist central party planning and a reflexive 'anti-imperialism' sourced from the seventies New Left.

This older current meets a new and youthful 'postcapitalist' techno-utopian wing epitomised by figures such as Paul Mason (2015), *Novara Media*'s Aaron Bastani (2015) and *Inventing the Future* authors Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015). Degrees of difference notwithstanding, this 'accelerationist' perspective unites with the older tradition around an understanding of capitalism, technology and historical development derived from the more deterministic elements of Marx, in the postcapitalist case fed through the readings of Italian postoperaists like Antonio Negri (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2001, see Pitts, 2017a, 2017b). Here the arc of history unfolds in the favour of the forces of production against outdated relations of production challenged by the hegemony-building of new and revolutionary political subjectivities - whether workers or Mason's multitudinous 'networked individuals' (2015).

Beyond these two leading political and intellectual strands we see the presence of many splinters, communities, and groupuscules that do not fit into either category and whose theoretical conceptualisations or tenacious practical activity find, for whatever reason, somewhat less of an uptake in defining the contours of what Corbynism is and can be at the present moment. This paper concentrates on the two leading strands of Corbynism: the Bennite left and the post-capitalist utopians. This is not only because they have the clearest, most established and most internally coherent worldview, but also because they interrelate in intriguing and unexpected ways which have been fundamental to the development of Corbynism thus far.

The aim of this article is to delineate the main characteristics of Corbynism by means of a comparison with what remains of its rival tendencies within the contemporary Labour party. In an essay for the *New Statesman*, Jonathan Rutherford argues that the only realistic philosophical alternative to Corbynism within the Labour Party is 'Blue Labour' (2017a). Rutherford, an academic and advisor to risen and fallen stars of the dormant Labour right like Chuka Umunna and Rachel Reeves, admirably contributes to ongoing attempts to take Corbynism seriously as an identifiable set of ideas. But, we suggest in this paper, Rutherford's posing of a stark choice between the two does not sufficiently address how both tendencies express wider philosophical points of convergence on the contemporary left around so-called 'post-liberalism' (Pabst, 2016a), the nation, the people and how each relates to the state. Selling readers on the assumption that there is no alternative, this obscures the true extent to which it is possible to articulate a real political-philosophical alternative to both Blue Labour and Corbynism based in a countervailing set of ideas sourced from within the left but not presently among its mainstream: a 'critical Marxist' alternative we begin to delineate in this paper. This alternative is 'critical' insofar as it deploys

Marxian categories with little mind for orthodoxy or tradition. By contrast to what it regards as the 'positivist' character of orthodox Marxism, which effectively accepts the categories of classical political economy – value, labour, money – while attempting to 'correct' them in favour of the working class, critical Marxism understands its task as the *critique* (in the Kantian sense) of those categories in their entirety.

Blue Labour arose as a political tendency within the Labour Party towards the end of the Brown premiership. Spearheaded by the academic and peer Maurice Glasman and sometimes associated, increasingly inaccurately, with the more open-minded party thinker and MP Jon Cruddas, it has been latched onto sporadically by numerous ambitious gadflies of the party's centre and right. Blue Labour argues that the latter period of the Blair/Brown government saw Labour lose touch with what was presented as its traditional supporters, socially conservative 'white working class' voters in small towns and post-industrial cities. Labour, it contended at the outset, had become the party of globalisation and metropolitan liberalism, pushing for an ever-more centralised state, free markets and mass immigration. It had prioritised 'abstract values' (Rutherford, 2016) and universalist principles of equality and rights over the particular communal bonds of mutual reciprocity, local identity, and national, familial and religious ties that characterised 'white working class' communities. Today, Blue Labour ascribes the former set of opposing principles to Corbynism, an association our critique exposes as strange and wilful.

In contesting this set of ideas, Blue Labour claims to retrieve a Labour tradition of mutualism in which a concept of a concrete 'common good' takes priority over notions of universality and equality (Glasman, 2011, p. 14), a tradition which had, it claims, been central to the party's foundation but abandoned as the Attlee government inherited the war-honed machinery of state power. Political and economic institutions, Blue Labour suggests, should be built around the settled 'primary communities' of a society – those with the longest-standing ethical way of being (Williams, 2015). Politics and the state itself should 'grow out of the experience of everyday ordinary life,' rather than being based on 'abstract values that exist prior to people's everyday experience and which it superimposes on their lives' (Rutherford, 2016). Blue Labour thus rejects liberal capitalism, a centralised state and the free movement of labour within the EU, and at times EU membership altogether. Free movement in particular is regarded as epitomising a topdown imposition upon the organic culture of the 'primary' or national community, one characteristic of the 'abstract' liberal capitalist order. Instead, Blue Labour favours a corporatist system of labour relations in which work is regarded not simply as a means to make a living but as the primary bearer of the cultural and ethical traditions of the national community, to which political realm should be subservient.

Rutherford's critique of Corbynism centres, as does ours, on the confluence between the more traditional left strands of Corbynism and the forms of postcapitalist (Mason, 2015) and accelerationist (Williams and Srnicek, 2013) thinking which have rapidly gained hegemonic status within the left intellectual milieu which has swung behind (and in fact preceded) Corbyn's leadership. Rutherford argues that the first – based on a Bennite programme of nationalisation and state control – was merely another reiteration of the 'command and control, tax and spend politics' that has befallen Labour since 1945. While the latter, self-styled 'postcapitalist' wing is more favourable to the kind of participatory politics that Blue Labour champions, for Blue Labour partisans its focus on the development of automated technology and the end of work, as well as its metropolitan liberal and public sector character, has led to a hollowed-out and asocial form of abstract universalism which is pushing Labour ever further away from the ethical and cultural traditions which have held both British society and the labour movement itself together for generations. This is a claim we contest.

Whilst we agree with some aspects of Rutherford's critique, we do not endorse the conclusions he draws from them. The idea that Blue Labour presents any kind of alternative to Corbynism ignores the extent to which both rest upon similarly flawed understandings of capitalist society, meaning that many of the faults of the latter are reflected in the former. In this we are indebted theoretically to the productive melting point where a Marxian analysis of class society and its forms of legal expression meets a clear-sighted political commitment to the gains of liberalism. The liberalism which we defend here from a left perspective is that founded upon a recognition of the importance of the formal separation of the state from society. The formal separation of state and society does not refer to the level of state intervention in the economy. Rather it means that the apparatus of the state does not belong to any one individual or particular social group as their personal property. Those who are elected to take charge of the state must justify their decisions before a 'public' whose members are not differentiated by legal privileges or cultural characteristics, but relate to the state and each other as formal political and legal equals.

Such a minimal definition of liberalism is by no means without contradiction, most notably that between the limitations of the nation-state which is the first port of call for the establishment of abstract

rights for its citizens, and the universal promise inherent within the notion of abstract right. Nor does it provide, in and of itself, any means of solving the radically unequal distribution of wealth within a capitalist society. It is this latter point which has historically led some Marx-influenced left analyses to downplay or disavow the significance of liberal political institutions and abstract rights, to regard them as mere covers for class oppression or the superstructural reflex of productive forces.

Both Corbynism and Blue Labour lay claim, in some ways, to this anti-liberal tradition within the left. But here we appeal to a different tradition of thinking that can be excavated from an unorthodox Marxian theoretical inheritance. This tradition has scant political expression and must thus be excavated from a set of diverse sources. What is crucial for the present is that at each turn in this tradition the temptation to collapse into 'post-liberalism', casually casting aside the hardwon gains of liberal institutions in the name of some perfected-community-to-come, is resisted with more strength than competing tendencies in the contemporary Labour Party seem capable of. There is, we argue, an alternative that clarifies and potentiates a reconfiguration of competing elements within both Corbynism and Blue Labour.

### **The critical Marxist alternative**

The critical Marxism advocated here runs contrary to the two dominant strands of Marxisant socialism of which both Blue Labour and Corbynism can in some sense be seen as the inheritors. Blue Labour draws from a more humanist, ethical variety that sees society assailed by the forces of commodification and monetary calculation and romantically seeks to rescue work as a human purposive activity from its alienation as labour; Corbynism, in both Leninist and postcapitalist guise, a more economic, determinist one that sees those selfsame forces as citadels to be appropriated by a class empowered by its productive labour, stifled under capitalism and unleashed in the alternative future society capitalist development makes possible. As such, the first understands contemporary capitalism and its critique in ideological terms, and the second on the basis of underlying material or economic trends. Our approach, on the other hand, sees each pole as constitutive of the other: the conceptual and the material, the political and the economic, the human and non-human, co-existing in a contradictory whole. It does not, in other words, reify social relations in such a way as to suggest their standalone separation from, and simplistic opposition to, one another. And it does not worry itself with finding the decisive 'base' that determines the 'superstructure'. Insofar as it sees it at all, it sees the latter not as a layer of illusion to be stripped away, but as an expression containing, in negation, the former. Human beings are not simple bearers of modes of production, brought into being by transhistorical forces of technological development, as some Marxists would have us believe. Rather modes of production are the fateful concretisation of particular forms of accumulated human practice, an objectification in which human subjectivity is both realised and, contradictorily, repressed.

The alternative approach offered here is present in Marx's dialectical unfolding of contradictions in *Capital*, most notably in his understanding of how liberal niceties of right and market constitute a real appearance expressing antagonistic class relations (see Marx, 1976, Ch. 6). It resounds in the defence of bourgeois rule of law as a carrier of the fruits of class struggle found in the work of E.P. Thompson and the latter-day Nicos Poulantzas (Thompson, 1975, see also Fine, 1994, Cole, 2001; Poulantzas, 1978). It is found elsewhere on the fringes of the Frankfurt School as its intellectuals reckoned with the positive contradictions of the rule of law against the totalising experience of fascism (Neumann and Kirchheimer, 1996).

In taking forward this tradition, our critique has at its heart a commitment to what Michael Walzer, identifies, in archly Stalinesque language, as the 'historical task of the left in the present period' (2017). This has three prongs. Firstly, 'a sharp leftist analysis and critique of what's going on'. Secondly, writes Walzer, 'the practical political work of the next few years is all too obvious; it is the defensive version of standard left activism. We have to defend what's left of the gains of post-Second World War social democracy.' Thirdly, the left must recognize that 'fighting from the left isn't all we have to do.' Rather, 'the dangers we face today are not dangers only to the achievements of the left', but to liberal society as a whole. As such, the third historical task of the left in the present period is to 'help hold the center.' Focusing on 'the defense of civil liberties and civil rights', this operates from the conviction that 'the survival of a vital center is also the precondition of an active left'. Here Walzer captures something crucial for the present conjuncture. As we show in this paper, competing tendencies in the Labour Party, like the left the world over, coalesce around a critique of liberalism as the flames lick at the sides of liberal society. In so doing they fail to recognize the extent to which much of what passes for a left politics of labour rests upon the legal and political relations liberalism guarantees.

What this call to hold the centre exposes is how far Corbynism and Blue Labour, in standing against much of what the loose tradition outlined above represents, play fast and loose with the liberal certainties on which class struggle and social democracy are contradictorily based. They treat with circumspection allegedly 'abstract' rights through which the rule of law guarantees and contains concrete forms of struggle, and rhetorically shore up the power of an isolationist nation-state at precisely the time where internationalist understandings of human association are needed to counteract the rise of authoritarian national populism.

A comparison of these two seemingly opposed philosophical and political tendencies on key points uncovers a series of unexamined shibboleths which run through the worldview of the contemporary left, uniting even those factions which regard themselves as being implacably opposed.

There are of course internal tensions within each side, which should not be underestimated. Within Blue Labour's orbit, the intellectual range and rigorous Marxist grounding of Cruddas (e.g. 1991) and big-tent, soft-left leadership potential of Lisa Nandy offer a bridge to a politics beyond the constraints of the project as presently constituted. Similarly, within Corbynism, journalist Paul Mason has at times acknowledged the necessity of holding onto the gains of liberalism as a prerequisite for the development of any future 'radical social democracy', while cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert has provided a strong defence of pluralism against rival Corbynist tendencies which lean towards a more homogenous, vanguardist approach (Mason, 2016; Gilbert 2017). Any comparative exercise necessarily involves an element of abstraction, and as a result, various areas of disagreement may drop out of view, while the rules and exceptions that define each mode of analysis in the last instance are brought to the surface. Nevertheless, drawing out the commonalities and continuities (though by no means identity) of the two worldviews is worthwhile to the extent that it makes the political ramifications of each much clearer for disenchanted Labour partisans stuck within them, who up to now have been offered no choice but to choose between two sides whose mutual public antipathy masks an essential connection.

In the end, we argue that the choice between Corbynism and Blue Labour is a deceptive one, between two visions based upon strikingly similar misreadings of the same set of issues: people, nation, Brexit and so-called 'post-liberalism'. Any alternative, we conclude, must thus rest on a fundamentally distinct set of analytical categories and political principles.

### **Nation, state and society**

To begin at the highest level of analysis, both Corbynism and Blue Labour see the world in essentially national terms. Blue Labour believes that a world of national communities is right and proper as a reasonable scale on which to conduct politics and create a spirit of solidarity and reciprocity among those within its borders. It suspects Corbynism of wishing to see the opposite: a borderless world in which national differences are steamrollered by an abstract global humanity. Rutherford thus suggests that 'Corbynism rejects patriotism as jingoism. Blue Labour embraces love of one's country as an essential part of internationalism. For one, nation states with their borders divide people against each other. For the other, nation states are essential for giving people democratic control and for managing globalisation' (Rutherford, 2017a).

Yet, in truth, Corbynism both desires and is presupposed on precisely the same system of nation-states as Blue Labour celebrates. In both its traditional and accelerationist forms, Corbynism is defined by a steadfast faith in the ability of the nation-state to eradicate inequality and poverty through a radical programme of intervention in the domestic economy. In the space where the old-school statist and contemporary postcapitalist left convene, the nation-state is the horizon for all dreams old and new. The former obsessively seeks the nationalisation of the railways, a totemic symbol of the state's assumed ability to singlehandedly disentangle capitalism's complex weave of contradiction and antagonism. While the latter rarely tackle the question of the state head on – as Nina Power (2015) notes, accelerationist theory is marked by 'an absence of thinking about the way in which the state continues to persist and how the state, or rather specific states, operates both in relation to capital but also in terms of repression' – it is unclear how a programme of mass automation and a basic income could be implemented and administered except through a nation-state granted total responsibility for the production, distribution and consumption of money and commodities. These policy demands have now been imported from the radical postcapitalist fringe to the mainstream of party decision making (see Dinerstein and Pitts, forthcoming). Despite claims to 'universality', advocates of a basic income at best merely restate the problem of the contradiction between a theoretically universal citizenship and the national borders which have historically demarcated the sphere of the rights of citizens. They offer no political solution beyond the promise of an automated plenty that will supposedly wipe away the conflicting claims of capitalist society 'as if with a sponge' (Adorno, 1983, p. 32).

The sanctity of the nation-state reappears in Corbynism's non-interventionist foreign policy which, for its adherents, marks the clearest break with New Labour. On the abstractly 'anti-imperialist' 'anti-war' trad-left which forms Corbyn's principal political constituency, the world is seen as one comprising impenetrable borders any force claiming an international or global legitimacy cannot reasonably contravene. International law is invoked, but only where the veto wielded by Russia and China at a UN level makes any intervention to protect civilians against states impossible. Ironically, this left 'legalism' when it comes to foreign policy jars with the countervailing left tendency to otherwise dispute the legitimacy of bourgeois law. As Walzer (2014) asserts, this belief in legal 'reasonableness' often militates against a more radical position of 'mutual assistance' that takes its authority by forms of identification and association beyond borders. It sometimes seems that, for Corbyn and the movement around him, the legalistic and apparently pacifistic belief in pursuing peace through diplomatic channels, without the implicit or explicit guarantee of military intervention to back it up, is a convenient alibi for a policy that in reality enables international law to be routinely ignored by national actors in spite of their lack of legitimacy on any wider grounds of global humanity.

Blue Labour's critique of Corbynism is that it does not take the nation seriously, basing its politics on a borderless global world. In fact, the opposite is true. Both Blue Labour and Corbynism, in different ways, focus on the nation-state as the irreducible agent of political action. Moreover, both prioritise the 'concrete' former part of the couplet 'nation-state' over the 'formal' or 'abstract' latter.

In different ways, both Blue Labour and Corbynism are intent on replacing what both regard as ineffectual, abstract and/or ideological 'formal' democracy with its 'real' or 'true' counterpart. For Blue Labour, political institutions built upon abstract rights and formal equality block the expression of the pre-political 'common good' which emerges naturally from the cultural traditions of a particular national community. Political institutions should not therefore impose the values of rights-based equality upon the community from the outside but instead be subsumed within it, acting only in such a way that those innate cultural traditions of reciprocity and mutual obligation are nurtured and sustained (Glasman, 2011). The relation between state and society must therefore become one of a unified 'concrete order' of land, community and political institutions (Schmitt, 2003). Formal rationality is overturned in favour of what Hegel (1991) witheringly describes as 'a mush of heart, friendship and enthusiasm.' Here the immediate interests and 'feelings' of one part of society become the foundation of what, pushed to its limits, comprises a totalising order in which the unexamined 'natural desires' of the chosen 'community' are given absolute priority over everything else.

This position is mirrored in the trad-left component of Corbynism. Here the state is regarded as the direct instrument of the 'social movement', whose members understand themselves to be held together not by formal legal rights but by their shared status as members of the 'community of the good' - in much the same way as Blue Labour regards its own cultural constituency as the sole custodian of the 'common good' (Hirsh, 2016). David Hirsh argues that Corbynism embodies a 'politics of position,' one which 'is more concerned with the 'objective' position of a person or a group, in a fixed and essentialist schema, than with what that person or group says or does.' The movement's self-anointed 'position' or identity of objective 'goodness' - expressed through the insistence that Corbyn and his supporters are on 'the right side of history' - allows it to frame all political criticism as 'personal attacks' or 'smears.' Questions of Corbyn's past associations with groups or individuals who have expressed antisemitic sentiment, for example, can be immediately dismissed on the basis of Corbyn's fixed identity as a 'lifelong anti-racist.' Political opponents can only be acting in bad faith, as exiles from the community of the good. Politics is thereby reduced to a Manichean battle of wills between two essentialised groups - the 'good' and the rest. For Hirsh, despite Corbyn's protestations that he is in favour of 'serious debate, serious discussion' rather than 'personal abuse' and 'name calling,' his 'faction's political practice is actually to avoid debate over ideas and policies' through the immediate referral to the 'objective' nature of the 'good' movement and its 'bad' opponents. As such, the institutions and practices characteristic of democratic states, those formal structures which - imperfectly, for sure - undergird and facilitate reasoned, rational public discussion are at times treated with disdain in comparison with the assumed 'goodness' of the 'movement.' The privileging of the 'movement' over formal democratic structures becomes clearer in the realm of foreign policy, particularly in the support for a variety of authoritarian states and movements that has defined Corbyn's own career, most notably through his central involvement with the 'Stop the War Coalition' (Bloodworth, 2015; Rich 2016). Here the Manichean split between 'good' and 'bad' is replicated on the global stage, with the USA and Israel always in the latter 'imperialist' camp, and their 'anti-imperialist' opponents in the former,

and thus automatically entitled to political support - their own commitment to democratic rights and freedoms notwithstanding.

This understanding of the relation between the 'movement,' party and the state also appears in the longstanding demand for reform of the internal structures of the party, a policy which Corbynism has taken over from its Bennite predecessor. The aim of such 'democratisation' is to ensure that Labour MPs (and governments) accede to the will of party members in the first instance – often, in practice, a minority of highly active members - rather than the electorate, or indeed extra-parliamentary social movements (Thompson, 2016). The relationship between the electorate and MPs (and government), one mediated through the balance of powers within the party itself – split between the membership, leadership, trade unions and the PLP - is thereby replaced by a direct and immediate relation between the self-selecting 'movement,' the leadership and the state. Corbynism has put this theory into practice through the occasional use of e-plebiscites of the membership as a means to circumnavigate the Parliamentary Labour Party, most notably over the 2015 vote to launch air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria (Barnett, 2015).

For the accelerationist wing of Corbynism, it is productive and technological development which is the bearer of the 'pre-political' normative status Blue Labour grants to national cultural forms, and the rest of the Corbyn left to the social movement of the good. Following an orthodox Marxist schema, the development of technology and productive capacity is regarded as the driving force of history and the measure of moral progress and rationality. From this perspective, the state is understood either as a mere derivative form of the processes of production, or a parasitic body constructed by the capitalist class in order to feed off the productivity of an endlessly creative and non-contradictory society. Formal legal equality, the mark of a state separated from society, is thus regarded as an ideological cover under which particular class interests are falsely presented as universal. Postcapitalists and accelerationists argue that while the interests of the capitalist class may once have led them to use their control of the state to support the development of productive technology, 'capitalism now constrains the productive forces of technology, directing them towards narrow and often fruitless ends' (Williams, 2013).

The task of accelerationism and postcapitalism is therefore to take control of the state so as to place its apparatus at the service of a fully automated rational society, using it to distribute a 'citizens income' directly to individuals rather than allowing subsistence to be mediated by the market, and ensuring that technology is allowed to develop to its full extent. As Alex Williams puts it, '[r]ather than working to smash the current capitalist system, the existing infrastructure [including, presumably, the state] is here identified as a platform requiring *repurposing* towards post-capitalist, collective ends' (Williams, 2013). This repurposing would reunite state and society by giving the former total responsibility for the latter in the construction of a unified 'sociotechnical hegemony' (Williams and Srnicek, 2013). The limits of 'formal democracy' are in this way overcome in the name of what for its proponents is the triumph of 'real democracy.' At last the true form of universal reason, of which the rational development of technology and productive capacity is the expression, is freed from its 'irrational' capitalist fetters and elevated to a position of dominance. In this way the partial, contradictory and hopelessly outdated forms of bourgeois property right are wiped out in the name of a harmonious techno-social order, free from exploitation and oppression.

From another perspective, however, such a unified sociotechnical state can be construed not as the harbinger of universal freedom but rather a return to a pre-bourgeois mode of personal domination. The whole of an individual's existence, both political and economic, is now directly dependent on their relation to a state responsible for the production, circulation and distribution of the means of subsistence. The restless and contradictory movement of state and society that exists within formal 'bourgeois' democracies is flattened into a singular dynamic of development permanently fixed in place by the social-state-technology nexus, one which is virtually impossible to challenge, let alone escape.

### **Sovereignty, state and people**

Both Corbynism and Blue Labour sense opportunity in Brexit to reinstate the sovereignty of the nation-state against global capital. In this way, both Corbynism and Blue Labour mistake sovereignty for a *thing*, something which can be passed back and forth, salvaged or lost. They fail to recognise that sovereignty is merely a particular social relation of power, inextricably tied up with the wider organisation of class society. This results in a dehistoricised and depoliticised understanding of how power functions. Sovereignty is ripped from its historical context and turned into an abstraction, which is then presented as the cure for all social ills.

In very similar ways both have thrown in their lot with an idea of Lexit, i.e., a left-wing Brexit (see Rutherford, 2016, 2017b; Glasman, 2016; also Bienkov, 2016, Guinan and Hanna, 2017a). Rutherford, for

instance, puts the Blue Labour case for Brexit when he suggests that it creates the opportunity for a national 'renewal' against the forces of global capital (see 2017c). On the other side, leading Corbynist economic thinker Joe Guinan has penned a series of punchy pieces arguing against 'the icy-smooth frictionlessness of the single market' (see Guinan and Hanna, 2017b). For Corbynism Lexit's promised restoration of British sovereignty would permit the state-centred nationalisation and local procurement which is regarded as the solution to the problems of British capitalism, and against which the EU is characterised as a barrier. This is despite the fact there is plenty of capacity for further state aid within the current mutually-agreed rules should a Corbyn-led government wish to implement its present manifesto promises (Tarrant and Biondi, 2017). Going further than this – i.e. an unilateral disregard for the EU's mutually-agreed state aid rules - would almost certainly lead to the imposition of retaliatory tariffs on heavily-subsidised British exports coming into the EU, if not an all-out trade war, and the fragmentation of pan-European production and supply chains - an outcome which would kill off dreams of a reinvigorated British manufacturing base at source (Stafford and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2017). For Blue Labour, on the other hand, it allows the exploration of a romantic, anti-modern English socialism wherein the capacity to take decisions over national life will help constitute the national community it desires. This is justified philosophically in its resistance to what Pabst (2016b) calls 'a capitalist culture that privileges mobility and permanent change over national sovereignty and more settled ways of life'.

In the search for restored and secured sovereignty, Corbynism is not so dissimilar to Blue Labour, characterising national sovereignty as representing an innate and inextricable unity between national state and its people. The repatriation of sovereignty within national borders is assumed to be consistent with the 'will' of people to 'take back control' of their lives, when the two are often logically and practically at odds. The desire for control through sovereignty is a demand that can never be met. Political commitments that promise to satiate that which is insatiable thus only uncork forces they will be hard pressed to rebottle.

This shared '*souverainisme*' (Coates, 2016, Levy, 2016) is insatiable and impracticable on three fronts. Firstly, the abstract sovereignty sought is impossible in a world society where standards, rules and regulations must by necessity follow the flow of commodities. Because both Corbynism and Blue Labour see the world as constituted essentially of nations, they are blinded to the extent to which what makes the world go around is the search for profits, and all dreams that propose to deny this are useless.

Secondly, the sovereignty they seek is pooled and shared between nations because the challenges they face and solutions they require are global in character, whether this be restraints on capital, tax evasion, jihadist terror, Russian aggression and destabilisation, mass migration or climate change.

Thirdly, the search for sovereignty identifies the interests of people living in a nation with those of the state that administers it, when they can be anything but. This is another manifestation of the abandonment of the formal separation of state and society, something made particularly clear in Corbynism's implacable non-interventionist foreign policy. Here, the key principle is that the sovereignty of a state cannot be infringed, regardless of whether groups within the country have called for assistance or multilateral consent granted. Regardless of internal struggles for the separation of the state and society - democratic rights, formal legal equality, a public sphere - the sovereignty of the state is seen as synonymous with that of the people who live within it, in spite of how antagonistic or even genocidal the relationship between the two.

In each of these three respects, the identification of popular sovereignty with the sovereignty of the state sells those seeking control an impossible dream. The Blue Labour critique of Corbynism suggests it is the former alone who face up to the return to sovereignty. But in truth it has a bedfellow in Corbynism, which works from a similar set of assumptions around the relationship of people, nation and state.

### **Populism and conspiracy theory**

In line with this identification of popular and national sovereignty, both Corbynism and Blue Labour talk of a 'people' - and this 'people', when invoked within the boundaries of a single polity in which state and society are conflated, cannot but be national. In this their politics chime with the mass genuflection on right and left towards the will of a mythical people expressed in the Brexit vote.

Both Corbynism and Blue Labour build their politics around a portrayal of a national community assailed by outside forces, a 99% whose productive efforts and forms of cultural belonging are undermined by an elusive 1% - whether they be metropolitan liberals and 'globalists', or multinational corporations, the media and 'Zionists.' Blue Labour sees the national community at threat from global process of commodification (Rutherford, 2017b) and flows of people and capital, over which the primary community must be granted a greater measure of control. Corbynism too suspects the power of outside capital to



procure and profit from the flow of commodities within the UK. This much is evidenced in Momentum's recent video campaign engaging in jingoistic parodies of the Dutch to suggest they benefit from ownership of 'our' railways to enjoy better rail services themselves (Mairs, 2017). This could be considered an aberration, were it not for the release of a similar video eight months earlier in cahoots with rail union the TSSA (Nicholson, 2017).

For both, the task then becomes to fabricate from the disparate reality of economic and social life a national people or 'community of the good', using this alleged elite as a counterpoint. What unites them on this front is the shared roots of many of their key intellectuals in a Gramscian way of seeing and doing politics. This comes in two forms. One is filtered through the cultural studies Compass soft-left that once incorporated the likes of Rutherford (see Rutherford and Shah, 2006) and today leading Corbynist intellectuals like Jeremy Gilbert (2017). The other is younger, Corbynist and enthused by the accelerationist attempt at a new Mont Pelerin society (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). The two meet in a forthcoming book by Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams, *Hegemony Now*.

Each of these strands of latter-day Gramscianism suggest that a 'national popular' or new commonsense can be pieced together out of the fragments of class society. But where struggle is a prerequisite to articulating contradictions around shared aims without abolishing them, both Corbynism and Blue Labour seek to immediately liquidate antagonism in an abstract national people. But owing to those same antagonisms it erroneously purports to abolish, this people cannot exist and has no common 'will' to speak of. Any politics pitched in its name that seeks to satiate this fictional will is doomed to failure, or worse.

A common thread here is the foundational influence on Blue Labour thinkers of Polanyian critiques of contemporary capitalism such as that advanced by Wolfgang Streeck (see, e.g., Glasman, 1996) and the role of the latter in occasionally advising and inspiring Corbyn's inner circle (Chakraborty, 2016). Streeck sees the power of international and global bodies and organisations, the EU included, as catalysing a democratic crisis of nation-states (2016, 2017). He thus sees nation-states as the most viable vehicle for resistance to capital today. This is reflected in Glasman's celebration of the fact that '[i]t is now no longer forbidden to think about a *national* economic system. It is our duty to develop this position and commit to the renewal of the complementary institutions that characterise our national economy' (2016).

Streeck's rhetoric in recent work has been, with some consternation, marked by a sharp distinction drawn between a national folk identity and the 'citizens of nowhere' identified as working in finance and the international corridors of power. As Adam Tooze suggests (2017), this kind of portrayal is uncomfortably close to ascriptions of a mysterious border-hopping rootlessness to cosmopolitan elites, and neither Corbynism nor Blue Labour are immune from its resonances.

The possibility of lapsing into this kind of critique circulates around the personification of the forces they seek to eliminate and the positive identification of the individuals and groups held to be personally responsible for all that is bad in the world. Pushed to its furthest extreme such personification ends up in anti-semitic conspiracy theorising, in which 'Zionists' and Israel are singled out as the instigators of imperialism and financial capitalism, surreptitiously inflicting their power upon unsuspecting national communities through control of the media, the banking system and cabalistic 'lobbies'.

The Blue Labour critique of Corbynism is disingenuous in its suggestion that Corbynism does not also desire the same Streeckian return to the nation-state against capital. In truth both Corbynism and Blue Labour are compromised, to different degrees, by the possibility of their politics taking on the destructive dimensions described above. While both may, in moral terms, genuinely abhor and condemn the nativist currents gaining strength on the reactionary right, they are similarly constrained in their ability to effectively confront and challenge them – because the essential logic of their critique of capitalist society is in many crucial respects the same.

### **Rights and abstractions**

As if to highlight the starting points they share with nativist right, both Corbynism and Blue Labour back controls on, or an end to, freedom of movement. In Blue Labour this comes as part of a wider attack on abstract 'rights' against supposedly more 'concrete' lived forms of responsibility and reciprocity. Abstract rights are associated with liberal global capitalism's 'abstraction from embeddedness' (Pabst 2016b), to which a nationally-defined system of 'covenants' based around 'substantive rather than merely procedural justice' (Pabst, 2016a) is posed as the alternative.

As concerns Corbynism the demand for controls on immigration emits from the largely Stalinist hard left (Pavett, 2017) and, perhaps more surprisingly, 'postcapitalist' proponent Paul Mason (2017). It is

auspiciously made in support of the pay and conditions of the national community of waged workers, supposedly undermined by what Corbyn calls the 'wholesale importation' of cheap labour from abroad (Lewis, 2017). In this light Corbyn's support for a 'jobs-first Brexit' can be read as a more palatable version of the cries for 'British jobs for British workers' that have sporadically risen up from the reactionary right and elements of the labour movement over the past decade.

Like Blue Labour, the Corbynist case against freedom of movement also associates the right to move in search of labour with the abstract forces of global capital, backed up by the jurisdiction of an international liberal order. A worker's decision to move in search of work or a different life is seen not as an expression of real human action or desire, but solely as a Pavlovian response to capital's demand for factors of production. Their 'right' to do so is seen only as a legal justification of the capacity for capital to move resources around the globe.

In negotiating this paradox Corbyn has expressed an ambivalent stance that seeks to mediate the contradictory character of free movement in capitalist society through a form of mediation that creates new contradictions in his own political conditions of possibility. Corbyn's approach to the referendum was to recognise contradictoriness, advocating Remain on the grounds of the rights associated with the free movement of labour, whilst at the same time recognising problems with the single market – famously captured in the Labour leader's equivocal statement that 'Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle, but I don't want that to be misinterpreted, nor do we rule it out' (Simons 2017). The compromise this strikes, whether with nativist electoral calculation or the underlying intellectual foundations of the Corbyn project, is politically objectionable to many supporters (Chessum 2017a).

What both Corbynism and Blue Labour miss is that abstraction active here- the international provision of abstract rights or the abstract movement of capital across borders- contains within it a concrete core that expresses real material relations of struggle and subsistence. By characterising movements of labour as mere movements of capital resources, they each contradict their own auspicious appeals to a politics based in everyday experience by stealing all agency and powers of struggle from the workers who seek new lives across borders.

Rights, from the alternative perspective advanced here, are both abstract but also concrete insofar as they were won through struggle and permit the search of concrete human beings for their reproduction as such. In a world where we live by labour, the freedom of movement of labour is the freedom to move full stop. By seeking to limit it, end it, or replace it with more 'practical', 'concrete' forms of reciprocity, Corbynism and Blue Labour both imply that these rights are reducible to a liberal or capitalist conspiracy to exploit workers or place them in competition with national communities. But they are much more than this, and concrete and practical in the first place.

From the perspective of capital, it is in fact preferable to exploit irregular migrant labour with no rights at all, or to establish a guest worker system in order to legally differentiate 'foreign workers' from their 'indigenous' counterparts, rather than having to face a workforce universally endowed with enforceable political, civil and workplace rights. The right to free movement – while limited to those fortunate enough to be born within the single market area – should be seen as necessary (though insufficient) step to a universal right to freedom, not an obstacle to be removed.

### **Liberalism and contradiction**

Both Corbynism and Blue Labour, in their own respects, reject liberalism and embrace the possibilities of a new 'post-liberalism' (Pabst, 2016a). This defines itself against that which is transactional, abstract and commodified, seeking to reinstate divergent visions of a close national community in their place.

Expressed in an editorial by sympathetic *New Statesman* editor Jason Cowley (2017), Blue Labour have led the way in welcoming Theresa May as the inaugural Prime Minister of a 'post-liberal' age that marks the return of national jurisdiction over free markets, the bringing back of lawmaking within national borders, and the reprisal of national-communitarian forms of political belonging (see also Rutherford, 2017b). Glasman, notably, took tea with May's then advisor, Nick Timothy (Parker et al, 2017).

Corbynism, meanwhile, unsteadily comprises two sides for whom the worse is always the better. The old trad-left see crisis as a revolutionary opportunity, and the techno-utopian accelerationist youth positively welcome capitalism meeting its end by propelling itself through its limits out the other end. For both wings, what is left of the liberal order appears as the final obstacle to a triumphant reconciliation of state and society in the name of either historical progress or the desires of a national people finally freed from the political, legal and ideological chains of 'centrism'.

In this spirit, Corbynism has greeted the election of Trump as a blow struck against the old liberal order, a shaking up of the pieces that their optimism permits will fall in a favourable formation (Rampen, 2016). The morning after Trump's election, Corbyn himself came out with a statement that read 'Trump's election is an unmistakable rejection of a political establishment and an economic system that simply isn't working for most people... This is a rejection of a failed economic consensus and a governing elite that has been seen not to have listened. And the public anger that has propelled Donald Trump to office has been reflected in political upheavals across the world' (Corbyn 2016). With Brexit, too, the turn of the UK public against the present state of things has been treated as confirmation that the old way is over, the new one about to begin, with Corbyn once again giving a morning-after statement heralding a blow struck by and for those 'many communities... fed up with cuts' (Pine 2016). As evidenced in Rutherford's piece mentioned at the outset of the paper, Blue Labour bears its own affinities with the events of 2016. But, in truth, both Blue Labour and Corbynism contain within them ideas about the world that could not exist without the liberalism whose seeming downfall they relish.

One of Blue Labour's strengths is its clear-throated appeal to a definable 'labour interest' (Rutherford, 2016, 2017b). Corbynism, meanwhile, supports trade union bargaining rights and better pay and terms and conditions for workers. But organised labour as we know it lives and breathes on the affordances of what Blue Labour and Corbynism dismiss as forms of 'bourgeois' legality and abstract 'rights'. The legal parity posited between employer and employee is the framework within which unions work to eke out pay increases and better terms and conditions for their workers.

Within this abstract appearance, then, is concealed an antagonistic relationship between the employee and employer often belied by the formal equality they share in the eyes of the law, but which the liberal juridical relationship between them manages and regulates – often, but not always, in favour of the employer - without pretending to resolve or abolish it. Out of this stems the entire edifice of social democracy itself: the rule of law, which is not simply a bourgeois liberal construction forced on workers in the name of their bosses, but contains within it the prehistory of the struggles against personal forms of power that made it possible.

Celebrating the end of liberal society is also a celebration of the ceding of these gains to a new wild west of work where employee-employer relationships resemble more the conditionality and dependence of the personal relation between feudal serf and baron than the formally equal legal entities of liberal society. The increasing prevalence of such conditions are not unrelated to the rise of authoritarian nationalism as a similar expression, higher up, of the same contemporary tendency to suspend the rule of law, to tyrants' flagrant disregard of international conventions in bombing, maiming and imprisoning their own citizens. There seems little for any left aware of its own basis to celebrate in this post-liberal moment.

Both Blue Labour and Corbynism wish to draw the world as they wish it would be. The problem is not here utopianism per se, which is implicit in all kinds of politics, nor the purported aim to transform society. It is rather the abstract character of this utopianism, as opposed to concrete utopianism which begins from the contradictions of human practical life as presently constituted (see Dinerstein 2016). In an attempt to escape the chaos of reality, in both Corbynism and Blue Labour abstractions are posited- like the people or the nation- that purport to transform antagonism from something which constitutes capitalist society as a whole into a personalised force which inflicts suffering from the outside, one which can be wiped away once and for all, if only their chosen moral community wills it strongly enough.

Promises to cleanse the world of contradiction are dangerous because they are impossible. This applies equally to the wishful thinking of Corbynists and Brexiteers of various stripes, each abstractly utopian in their own way. Liberalism, rejected on all sides, is the class act in the containing, confrontation and channelling of contradictions. It does not purport to abolish or falsely resolve antagonisms, but manages and articulates them in a way that retains and expresses- sometimes subtly- the struggles and tensions that surround them. Even whilst sometimes acting as a mechanism for class struggle waged from above rather than below, liberalism mediates antagonistic social relations impersonally via legal frameworks and civil society institutions sat between society and state, rather than attempting their liquidation in regimes of personally-wielded power or state control. In an age of nativist and authoritarian post-liberalism, This is why, short of any better alternative on the horizon, it must be protected as the possibility of a left politics at all in the present, as a space for experimentation against its assailants on left and right.

## Conclusion

The similarities between the two intellectual tendencies highlighted here makes it strange that there should be such animosity and mutual suspicion between them. There is in fact much for each to like in the other. Of course, we have abstracted here from each tendency to bring out the rule or exception that defines them. This obscures the extent to which both Blue Labour and Corbynism contain divergent strands more savvy and sophisticated than their internal competition.

Within Blue Labour's loose milieu, there are those who prioritise the protection of the forms of collective legal articulation through which labour struggles proceed (Cruddas, 2015). There are those that recognise the complexity of Englishness or Britishness in a group of islands divided along lines of nationality, class and the urban-rural divide and who make clear-voiced appeals to the maintenance of liberal rule of law at a time of its dissolution (Nandy, 2017a, 2017b). It is the jarring inconsistency of these voices with the more reactionary elements of the Blue Labour intellectual coalition that makes the application of the label increasingly untenable to many typically considered in its orbit.

Within Corbynism's more coherent but conflicted intellectual base, meanwhile, there are those against Brexit and any concession to racists and xenophobes on immigration (Chessum, 2017a; 2017b). There are those able to muster solidarity with those subject to brutal regimes abroad (Speak Out on Syria, 2016). Often these three positions are represented in a single section of Corbyn's support sourced from the Alliance for Workers Liberty. There are also those who, at times, recognise it is first necessary to save elements of liberal society before we challenge or seek to expand them (Mason, 2016).

Looking out upon these fractures, any serious alternative must avoid falling into that which Blue Labour and Corbynism have been found equally culpable of above. In so doing it must stand to drive a wedge within and between them. This could create space for the best and most interesting elements of each to gain new and freer forms of political expression.

This alternative, based in the work of the luminaries listed in the introduction, is one already there, looming in the left's subconscious waiting to be (re)discovered. Further practical, political and theoretical work will be necessary to draw out the implications of the subterranean tradition represented here for the present. Occasional upswells like soft-left 'ginger group' Open Labour mark out possible factional terrain for this (see Thompson and Pitts, 2017). But we can already discern some of what a real theoretical alternative to both Blue Labour and Corbynism would entail.

It would deny the so-called 'will of the people'. It would instead recognise and protect the space of pluralist dialogue and debate, acknowledging the right to and inevitability of difference, and the importance of democratic structures and institutions which facilitate its articulation. It would view the democratic space of negotiation between formal equals as an achievement won through struggle rather than an obstacle or fetter to be casually cast aside in the name of a chimerical 'real' or 'concrete' democracy- something in evidence in Labour's support for the repeal of the 2016 Trade Union Act but not always so much in evidence elsewhere

It would see national borders as no barrier to intervention in practical solidarity with individuals who, like most, have no choice living under the state they find themselves in. It would understand that the kind of sovereignty it seeks is not something realisable in this world, and that stringing people along in its search is selling a dangerous political stimulant. It would instead seek to work with other states in the hope of someday abolishing their necessity altogether. Even at the level of transnational cooperation, control cannot be 'taken back' from capital, but a more cosmopolitan approach would at least get to grips with capitalism's global character in a way the nation state alone is incapable of. In line with this any alternative would welcome interaction with what is 'outside' and aim for the abolition of any gap between inside and out to begin with, rather than suspecting it on the basis of nationalist conspiracies.

It would also not misrepresent how power works in contemporary society by building political coalitions of homogenous 'people' against omnipotent and parasitical 'elites', each of which do not exist, and instead of persecuting their personalisations, build political movements posed against the abstract forces that do dominate us: money, capital, commodities. It would do so in the first instance by seeing what others see as abstract rights as concretely constituted results of struggle, defending freedom of movement of labour as the freedom to move itself in a world where we live only through labour. The challenges that face the left as the certainties of the neoliberal era slowly collapse are inescapably transnational in character. They can only be grappled with through the protection, reform and expansion of the democratic transnational institutions that do currently exist – with the EU, in the British context, being of course the most pertinent – rather than turning away from internationalism in the false belief that a resuscitated national sovereignty provides the means to 'take back control' in a world shaped by the contradictory, abstract power of capital.

This call for a reinvigorated internationalism may appear no less 'utopian' than the schemes put forward by competing post-liberal wings of the Labour Party today. But the difference is that insofar as this alternative is utopian at all it regards utopia in a *concrete* sense, rather than abstract- or, better still, a realistic and pessimistic 'minimum' utopia along the lines proposed by Norman Geras (2017, pp. 49-60). In putting forward such a concrete or 'minimum' utopia, this seeks to protect liberalism as an unsatisfactory system for the management of contradictions, but one which stands as the necessary precursor to any socialist politics intent on the avoidance of authoritarianism. It would therefore seek to confront and articulate contradictions deliberately and democratically, rather than falsely abolishing them in utopian schemes of national or popular renewal.

In all this it would not offer the false hope of optimism about history's unfolding or a blanket rejection of the current practical forms and real abstractions through which humans relate to one another. And, by doing all the above, it would break through the false choice offered between two similarly flawed worldviews, neither of which is able to mount a sustained defence of the hard-won gains of the liberal order from the barrage of attacks of a rising reactionary right - because they ultimately share many of its premises.

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